Promising Practice: Occupational Training Cohorts
Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County
Health Careers for All

The Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County (WDC) includes the purchase of specific occupational training cohorts at community and technical colleges as one training component in its Health Careers for All (HCA) project, supported by a Health Profession Opportunity Grant (HPOG) from the Office of Family Assistance. WDC has found that using grant funds to support this type of strategy allows HCA to effectively engage its partners, particularly employer and education partners: funding lowers the risk of testing new strategies, and the cohort provides a concrete opportunity to partner rather than a generalized and sometimes unclear invitation to "work together." At the same time, WDC is able to "learn by doing" and create a case for sustaining those practices that are effective.

As one example, WDC is using HPOG funds to bring employer and education partners together to address a common gap in the career pathway between NA-C (Nursing Assistant Certified) and LPN/RN (Licensed Practical Nurse/Registered Nurse). HCA designed a cohort for entry-level incumbent healthcare workers that packages all of the prerequisite coursework required for entry to the Associates Degree in Nursing (ADN) program, along with the ADN program itself. The cohort will run for approximately three and a half years, including both the prerequisite and ADN phases of training.

Two challenges that employer partners have expressed with regard to supporting entry-level incumbents to pursue additional training that qualifies them for higher-level positions are **funding** and **scheduling**. In this case WDC is using HPOG funds to pay for the cohort, covering all tuition, fees, books, and supplies for the entirety of the training. This practice has effectively eliminated the funding barrier in the near term and allowed the program to focus considerable effort on scheduling challenges, both working with the college to regularize/create greater predictability in the academic schedule and working directly with employer partners to explore/troubleshoot challenges they face internally.

Internal employer challenges include backfilling/arranging for coverage while student employees are in class, supporting reduced schedules that accommodate training, maintaining full-time-equivalent (FTE) levels that allow students to retain critical benefits, exploring mobility within the organization where possible (e.g., supporting changes in position/schedule/FTE to accommodate training), and managing staff morale issues that may stem from perceived preferential treatment for employees in the cohort. Because WDC is working with a diverse group of employers, including both larger healthcare organizations and smaller community health clinics, its employer partners experience those challenges and opportunities to varying degrees.

The cohort includes the following specific design elements:
- Packaging of prerequisite (prereq) coursework to increase efficiency of moving through the prereq phase: This phase can be complex because some prereq courses are actually prerequisites for others, courses fill up if students don't register early enough, etc.

- Regularized schedule to address logistical challenges for both incumbent workers and their employers related to school schedule changing each quarter: At least through the prereq phase, students are on campus Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays 2:00 – 5:00 p.m. (plus online work and Saturday review as noted below).

- Hybrid campus-based and online instruction: Face-to-face instruction is critical with the level of academic rigor, but the hybrid approach allows for reduced time on campus/away from work.

- Review sessions/tutoring built into the model: The jump in academic rigor between NA-C and prereqs/nursing curriculum is considerable, and individuals who are working often don't have as much time available to study. (Saturday review sessions are built into the model and are mandatory, creating formal time for review and study.)

- Use of cohort approach to leverage peer support: The cohort approach allows for customized design elements like those described above as well as strong peer support, which together have a strong positive effect on retention.

- Campus-based coordinator/single point of contact for the cohort: This resource person can streamline and assist with registration, financial aid, academic issues, etc.